



(U//FOUO) Experiences of a SIGINT'er in Baghdad

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Working as the Data Acquisition (S3) lead in Baghdad (U//FOUO)

(U//FOUO) I've never been overly prone to writing about my experiences, but following [Donna Rober's Jan 7 SID today article](#), I allowed myself to be "persuaded" to submit an article for *SID today*. You see, Donna took over my job in Baghdad as Data Acquisition (DA) lead at the end of my four month rotation and within a month had gladly shared her experience with the larger NSA workforce, whereas I had not.

(TS//SI) Let me begin by saying that this was one of the most interesting and rewarding jobs I have had as an NSA'er. The "reward" part was sometimes hard to see on a day-to-day basis, but in retrospect it was certainly there. Most of the DA projects I was involved with had a two to twenty-four month timeline. Thus it was hard to do much more than push each project a little further down the road. The things that you get to see through to completion, you probably had little input on at the start, and the things that you initiate, you don't get to see through to completion. The CSG and CST* personnel in Iraq have the advantage of going home at the end of each shift knowing that they made a difference in that day's fight. The DA teams from [OTRAS](#) or other organizations can leave at the end of their deployments knowing that they found signals and fielded equipment that is making a difference. The reward from the DA lead position takes looking at it from the longer prospective.

(TS//SI) Looking at my experience in retrospect, I am very gratified to have been a part of what NSA is doing in Iraq. Anyone who ever thinks of NSA as "risk averse" should get involved in what DA is pursuing in Iraq. Organizations from across DA to include [CTG](#), [LA](#), [SSO](#), and [TAO](#) are involved in a large number of access projects that push the envelope in different ways. Being the DA lead in Baghdad provided the opportunity to be at the forefront of what is essentially an all-out effort to penetrate Iraqi networks using everything in the tool box of the most sophisticated SIGINT agency in the world. Working daily with personnel from across NSA to bring our technology to bear at the optimum access points not only provided an excellent education in cutting-edge tools and techniques but also an education in the power of "enabling" in a no-holds barred fashion. It was an opportunity to see NSA people and organizations being very forward-leaning and aggressive.

(TS//SI) Being the "field rep" for a number of projects entailed deciding daily which priorities were most important and had to be on that day's to-do list and which could wait another day. It meant juggling not only priorities but also juggling operational avenues and approaches to determine the best path for arranging access. This meant continually evaluating relative risks (physical, counter-intelligence, and discovery risks) and gains of each approach. The great thing was that the Iraqi Issue Management Team (IMT) and supporting DA offices seldom second-guessed me -- they understood that risk management is best accomplished in the field and worked with the field to get the job done.

(TS//SI) The position also entailed working daily with a wide spectrum of personnel including: Iraqi government personnel engaged in telecommunications and IT issues for Iraq; small and medium sized Iraqi communications contractors; the CEO's and Chief Technical Officers of the major Iraqi telecommunications service providers; Iraqi cabinet level officials; State Department personnel at all levels; US military communications personnel from a 2-striper to a 2-star; and CIA personnel in the field.

(TS//SI) Every day in Baghdad, I started the day looking forward to what I had to do. By the end of the day (12-15 hours later), the to-do list for the next day would likely be even longer

with a number of things still left from the previous day but that was okay. Every day was different and brought fresh challenges, and fresh opportunities to consider different ways to pursue the target. This is not to say that everything was rosy, for there were certainly many setbacks along the way. Some projects seemed to move backwards faster than they moved ahead and some roadblocks did ultimately prove to be insurmountable. However, every day did provide the opportunity to see the SIGINT system being as aggressive as we have ever likely dared to be in pursuing the target. Would I do it again? You bet!

* (U) Notes:

CSG = Cryptologic Services Group

CST = Cryptologic Support Team

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